

## **Village Center Revitalization**

### **Oakland Mills Village Center Listening Session**

**April 22, 2008 Session Notes**

These meeting notes provide an overview of the presentation and meeting discussion. Comments are organized by topic, rather than arranged in the order that they were made.

## **Introduction**

Kimberley Flowers, DPZ; Bill Mackey, DPZ; Randy Clay, DPZ; Candace Dodson-Reed, County Public Relations; Ian Kennedy, Executive Assistant; and Jessica Feldmark, Senior Advisor to the County Executive, were present at the April 22 Oakland Mills Village Board meeting. Bill Mackey explained the listening session process and reviewed the handout questions. About 30 people attended.

## **Village Discussion**

### **What Works Well?**

Many members of the audience felt the community-based activities and facilities located within the Village Centers were important features that differentiate them from conventional strip centers. Some reflected on the success of the revitalization initiatives and committee work the community has been engaged in. From that effort a master plan for the Oakland Mills Village Center (OMVC) has been created and should be used for guiding future planning and development.

Residents mentioned the ice rink as a unique facility that will be an important draw for people as a destination activity in the center. Family-owned businesses were also mentioned as a special part of Columbia's retail identity. Original merchants are still located in OMVC and there needs to be a strong commitment to encouraging more while retaining those Oakland Mills has.

### **What Changes Might Improve the Village Center?**

Some residents expressed frustration over lack of control in land use decisions concerning the Village, particularly the Village Center. There is difficulty in dealing with nine different property owners. One member of the audience was concerned about the divide between CA, Village Board and County. It was felt the board should take a stronger role as representative to the County. Another problem mentioned was management of community facilities, such as The Other Barn (TOB), which isn't open on weekends. A community center should function like a community hall with better hours and space available for neighborhood HOAs. Funding was noted as a challenge, but the speaker was optimistic about the opportunity to redefine the role TOB plays in the community. It was suggested there might be an entity created that manages property held in common among different stakeholders.

While discussing connectivity, one speaker spoke of how the pedestrian bridge across Route 29 is not attractive and doesn't function as an important connection. Many agreed the bridge could be a catalyst for revitalization and that its aesthetic quality is just as important as its function. Specific concerns about the Village Center included how it sits in an "elbow," not really the center of the village. Without significant through-traffic, visibility and connectivity must be addressed to make it a destination. Another point raised was the geography and insular nature of the older centers which is ineffective at capturing commuters on their way home. OMVC is nestled at the end of two roads and it's easier to stop somewhere else. Signage and way-finding clues are needed.

### **What Land Uses Might be Appropriate in the Village Center?**

Members of the audience recognized that Village Centers are different and regulations need to respond to the unique character of each. When describing what might work well for OM, one member felt two-to six-story redevelopment would be in keeping with the existing scale and supported three-story buildings with ground floor commercial and emphasis on “mom and pop” retail with upscale residential. An important consideration was that OMVC is smaller than others and cannot handle as many housing units as others. Many were concerned that density be limited in order to maintain the existing scale.

One member noted a need for all land uses in the center and was in favor of residential. Although aware that the center needs a population base to support commercial development, the speaker felt that there was a more pressing need to create additional commercial. A balance among different uses needs to be maintained and residential units cannot be built in excess of others. Residential could be phased in with additional development. Income mix would also be an important part of looking at new residential.

One speaker favored development where people don’t have to rely on cars for travel. One example is senior housing in close proximity to retail, preferably “mom and pop.” In response to support for new development, one member of the audience cautioned that “city-fying” a place doesn’t mean it will be attractive. The current pattern of development in Columbia attracts families, which could change if that pattern changes. The speaker encouraged great care about change, what is valued and what works well. There was a desire to see a slower process where people have more of a voice. It was said developers want to build; it’s the role of citizens to protect what’s important for them about their community.

### **What is an Appropriate Mix of Uses for the Village Centers?**

Some members of the audience felt a formula could be applied when making decisions about residential units. One example is using free and reduced meals (FARM) to determine appropriate housing mixes. Some areas of the Village where lower-income units have been concentrated can’t afford to do some of the regular maintenance and property upkeep. Decisions need to be based on the context of what exists. One speaker talked about the diversity of Oakland Mills as an asset and the importance of maintaining an income, housing and racial mix. Many felt diversity could be maintained by spreading different types of housing and supporting full-spectrum approaches throughout the community.

Another factor raised about additional housing was the location of the Village Center. Where it sits, roads that provide access and capacity to handle higher density will be important. Income demographics and geography are key factors. One speaker noted that OMVC is already surrounded by high density housing so additional density may not be an appropriate solution. Another speaker mentioned Jim Rouse favored denser centers knowing they couldn’t be supported by existing population bases. Many agreed that decisions should come from a community-based process rather than a developer-based project.

### **What should be the Process for Village Center Revitalization?**

Many felt that GGP shouldn’t serve as the gatekeeper for development in Columbia if GGP doesn’t own the property. There were many different opinions on who should provide that function. Some saw this as an opportunity to build a stronger relationship with the county and allow government to serve that role. Others were concerned about this power going to the county and if changes would be made with an understanding of Columbia and its village history. One response was to have Columbia representation on the body making these decisions. Another approach described how citizens could be tasked with developing a plan and giving guidance on what makes the Village a special place. This might be a group of appointed citizens. Despite differing views, most agreed the gatekeeper should no longer be GGP and the process for change should lead to better coordination between CA, property owners and the county.

### **Should a Master Plan be required before a Village Center can redevelop?**

Many felt a master plan should be required before a Village Center can redevelop; however, it was also recognized there other possibilities. This would depend on the skills of those bringing the plan forward (planning team, citizens, etc.). One change could include designation of centers as special revitalization districts or an overlay zone to address parking, design, special taxing and loan programs.

One speaker saw the Village Center as just one piece of the Village. It should be coordinated with other parts, and other plans, including downtown. The pedestrian bridge is an example. Plans should be interactive and codependent, and there a balance should be created. Another speaker explained how new this process was. Residents haven't had to worry about master plans for 40 years but now Villages are at an in-between point. An emerging question is to consider rights of individual property owners compared to one company. One speaker thought master plans should be created for Village Centers as guidance for reviewing proposals within a larger context. These could be used to coordinate decisions for all centers.

Reference was made to the process used in Routes 1 and 40 corridors as a model for planning changes to Village Centers. Both studies of these areas and public input were used to create a plan which was then translated into specific amendments to zoning. Many thought each center should have its own plans but also understood that some Villages may not want a county planning process. Plans should be for the Village, not just the Village Center. This was seen as necessary to guard against proposals deviating from a community vision.

Many expressed a desire to see village planning coordinated with CA. In the case of disagreements, one suggestion was to have CA take on a facilitator/mediator role. Some saw an opportunity for CA to change and would like to see CA have a role in working with the county on plans. CA has not stepped beyond what it has done traditionally and a capacity to go beyond what it does now should be found.

### **Should Design Guidelines be Included in the Process?**

Many felt current aesthetic control is inadequate to create a unified appearance. For example, there are six different types of light fixtures in and around OMVC. Guidelines are needed. One speaker asked about regulations for vacant lots and buildings to restrict the number of years they remain unused. Some felt a balance is needed between a developer's desires, land owner's rights and a community's needs.

One speaker called for promotion of sustainable, healthy places through multiple channels of input and analyzing digital and social media. People could be brought together to brainstorm what they feel would be good for the community. Groups need to be reconnected to engage in the process of planning and sharing resources. Many recognized the need for coordination among HOAs, Village, CA, and county.

Many agreed developer pre-submission meetings are good, and one-on-one meetings would also benefit the planning process. It's better to have the owner/developer involved at the front end rather than later in the process. One speaker suggested these meetings may not need to be first, and the county should encourage relationships and promote open dialogue. One speaker expressed the importance of having the county involved at critical points in the development process. DPZ was recognized for its support of OM through many years of revitalization work as the kind of partnership that needs to be established.

### **Closing Comments**

There was a desire to see community outreach and a process with clearly defined goals and milestones. A speaker noted the need to take global warming and climate change into consideration when planning.

*T:\Shared\DECP\Comm Plan\Columbia VCR\Meeting Notes\OMVC Notes\VCRnotesOM050808.doc*